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A Tale of Four Elections: Central Europe September 1997-September 1998

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Abstract: This article analyses and compares the four elections held between September 1997 and September 1998 in the four 'Visegrad' countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), all of which led to a change of government. It concentrates on the effect of these elections on the development of party systems, seeking to identify trends across the region. It notes that the key issue was the restructuring of the centre-right. It concludes that party systems remain more unstable than might have been thought and that the process of restructuring is far from over.

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Introduction

In the year between September 1997 and September 1998, general elections took place in all four core central European states: Poland (September 1997), Hungary (May 1998), the Czech Republic (June 1998) and Slovakia (September 1998). All four elections were important in that they led to some form of 'alternance'. All were also important in terms of the evolution of the party system. Taken together, they point up a number of important political trends across the region, as it stands on the threshold of EU membership, possibly even within the next parliamentary terms, not least in relation to the development of the party systems. Let us first look at the issues and outcome in each of the four countries, before drawing together the threads across the region.

1. Poland

Between 1993 and 1997, Poland was governed by a coalition of 'old system parties', the SLD, based on the reform communists and the trade unions, and the PPL (Peasant Party). Electoral reform and divisions on the right, in large part deriving from the conflict surrounding Lech Wałęsa, had meant that at the 1993 election, almost 30% of the vote went unrepresented because it was split between numerous small right of centre parties. Indeed, only one right of centre party achieved any parliamentary representation. This gave the SLD and PPL an overwhelming and unrepresentative majority in the *Sejm*. Continuing splits on the right after 1993 further ensured the defeat of Wałęsa's bid to win a second term at the 1995 presidential election and the election of Aleksander Kwaśniewski (SLD) as President, concentrating all executive power in the hands of the SLD. Thus, the SLD and its allies controlled the *Sejm*, government and presidency [Webb 1992, Wesolowski 1996].

At last, this concentration of power in the hands of the left and the repeated lesson that division meant defeat, did spur the parties of the right towards unity and though the road was thorny, it led in the end to the formation of the Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) and the coalition with UW, bringing the various parties of the *Solidarność* family

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back together again in government after the 1997 election. This process of reunification was difficult, complex, indeed often Byzantine. Its success was by no means certain and its progress strewn with obstacles. Even now, after two years in government, AWS remains a very fragile and combustible plant. This conflict continued even after the eclipse of Lech Wałęsa, who was at one and the same time the right's best asset and the main obstacle to its unity. There were several different and competing game plans for uniting the right, each with a different leadership centre. The first not very successful efforts were launched already before the 1995 presidential elections. These were no more than loose platforms or alliances of small and medium sized parties, mostly then outside Parliament. While registering some success at the 1994 local elections, these alliances were unable to meet the much stricter requirements of unity, discipline and at least minimum political coherence posed by the pressure of a two-round presidential election. There were two such alliances: the centre-right Pact for Poland, formed in June 1994 by five Christian democratic, traditionalist, pro-Wałęsa parties and, secondly, the more right-leaning Eleventh of November Agreement between five other, smaller libertarian, free market and more eurosceptic parties. Neither had much impact at the 1995 presidential election [Fitzmaurice 1997].

The 1995 presidential election, at which Wałęsa was defeated narrowly in the second round, eliminated him as a factor of unity, or more often division, on the right. It also saw the anti- or non-*Solidarność* conservative former premier, Jan Olszewski, emerge as a potential unifier of the right. He had 'profiled' himself, through his presidential campaign, scoring a surprising and respectable 6.5%. He used this as a springboard for this evocatively-entitled Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP). For a time, ROP seemed likely to become the pole of unification of the right, rising to 15% in the polls and sucking in several smaller groupings. The battle was then joined. The centre-right elements of the former *Solidarność* parties realised that they must react to this development or be sidelined. The *Solidarność* trade union and party under its dynamic leader, Krzaklewski, reacted and acted. Division and lethargy was stamped out. *Solidarność* put its muscle behind the creation of an electoral coalition that could challenge SLD and find more centrist coalition partners, such as UW or possibly PPL. UW was preferable on economic issues and PPL on social matters. Against PPL was the fact that it was an 'old system' party. In favour of UW was its membership of the wider historical *Solidarność* family.

Soon, the *Solidarność* electoral alliance (AWS) pulled ahead and drew in the remaining independent groups on the right. It achieved both greater critical mass and greater credibility as a possible alternative government. By the time of the election, ROP had been marginalised. AWS won 33.8% and 201 seats to 5.56% and six seats for ROP. No other grouping on the right won seats in Parliament, now slimmed down to a mere five parties (ROP-AWS-UW-PPL-SLD).

On the left, as in Hungary, SLD emerged from four years of power in good shape. Its share of the vote even increased to 27.1% (from 20.4% in 1993). This post-communist party has consolidated itself as the main party of the left and the only leftist pole in a two-party or two-bloc system. Again, as in Hungary, the PPL, its smaller coalition partner took the heat, reducing to a more long-term tenable size.

The western 'dream coalition' of pro-European modernisers (SLD and UW), on the model of the Hungarian 1994-98 MSZP-SDS coalition, was neither arithmetically nor

politically possible in Poland. UW was therefore relieved of this difficult choice, being drawn into a centre-right coalition with national conservatives as the only possible coalition. The future alignment of parties in Poland still remains open. Can AWS consolidate into a real party or will it split again? Will UW permanently gravitate to the centre-right, or can it retain its long-term independence and act as a liberal, centre, balancing party like the German FDP? Finally, what of PPL? From the substance of its positions it should align itself with AWS. Can it now do this, or will history still prevent that?

2. Hungary

In the first, freely elected Parliament (1990-94) [“Hungary” 1990], Hungary was governed by a three-party centre-right coalition (MDF-KNDP-FKGP) led by Prime Minister Antall (MDF). The election had been less a plebiscite on the old system than a competition between two parties from the opposition, MDF and the liberal SDS. MDF won the contest, often with second-round MSZP (former communist) votes. The MDF-led government was characterised by splits (in both MDF and FKGP) and by failure to meet the expectations of the people both in terms of economic reform and democratic renewal [Fitzmaurice 1997].

The key question was, which of the three opposition parties – SDS, FIDESZ or MSZP – would emerge as the alternative pole? All three led in the polls at various stages. Eventually MSZP, under Guyla Horn, emerged as the main contender. It won an absolute majority in 1994 [Fitzmaurice 1995a], but preferred to form a coalition with SDS, giving it broader political legitimisation and the two-thirds constitutional majority in Parliament. This ‘dream ticket’ of pro-EU, pro-NATO modernisers, committed to economic reform, was a good government, but the improved macro-economic figures and its foreign policy successes (NATO membership, opening of EU, accession negotiations, settlements with Slovakia and Romania...) did not produce a ‘feel good factor’ among the electorate, while new problems such as crime and renewed difficulties over the Danube Dam project took centre stage. Above all, SDS got itself marginalised in the coalition, bore responsibility for some key areas of relative failure, such as law and order, and failed to sell the coalition, its success and SDS’s own contribution to its electorate. SDS therefore plummeted (like PPL in Poland) from 19.3% in 1990 to a near catastrophic 7.88% in 1998. It led in only two constituencies and could only secure 24 seats overall. MSZP, on the other hand, stabilised at 32.25%, only 0.7% down on 1994. Due to the electoral system, the new unity of the right and the weak solidarity with SDS, it could only secure 134 seats, fewer than FIDESZ, despite leading FIDESZ in its share of the vote in the first round. The same share of the vote gave 134 seats in 1998 against 209 in 1994, similar to the position of SLD in Poland. As in Poland, though MSZP has secured its position as a strong left-wing pole and the only opposition to the centre-right. For SDS, the best hope is to become a small, balancing liberal party ‘making’ governments. The worst scenario – just as likely – is for it to be pulled apart, split and become swallowed by FIDESZ and MSZP.

As in Poland, the determining issue in the 1998 election was the restructuring of the right. Already before the 1994 election, FIDESZ had signalled a shift to the right after failing to reach a pact with SDS to form a liberal centre. However it was too soon, as both MDF and FKGP considered themselves better placed to organise that restructuring. Given FIDESZ’s poor showing in 1994 (8.02%) and its continuing internal debates, this was not unreasonable. FIDESZ then embarked on a wide-ranging policy review and listening

exercise, coupled with appeals for unity of the opposition. These strategies paid off. FIDESZ rose in the polls and dominated both media and expert debate. The populist campaigns of Mr. Torgyán, FKGP leader, were soon punctured and FIDESZ took over the leading position in the opposition camp.

By the time of the election, MDF had already ceded leadership to FIDESZ. While still seeking to win enough votes to be represented in Parliament via county and national lists, MDF agreed on some joint candidates with FIDESZ already from the first round and otherwise automatic withdrawal at the second round in favour of FIDESZ elsewhere. Less openly, KDNP had adopted the same approach. Neither won 5% of the vote. FKGP did not give up in advance. It could expect to win 5%, and in many rural areas it could expect to lead in the first round, as indeed it did. Its 13.77% (third place), an increase on 1994, and its numerous well-placed candidates, as well as the charismatic if erratic leadership of Torgyán made it a factor to reckon with. FIDESZ knew it would need FKGP but did not wish to offer a flank to MSZP and SDS by negotiating any deal with Torgyán in advance. It therefore agreed to withdraw all its candidates unconditionally in favour of better placed opposition candidates. These were, in practice, almost all FKGP candidates. It called on FKGP to do the same but refused to negotiate as Torgyán demanded. It was a poker game. Eighty-one FKGP candidates were withdrawn and fifteen FIDESZ candidates pulled out. No talks took place before the election, but once the election was over, Victor Orbán made it clear that FKGP was his priority partner. No talks were held with the only other right-wing party that won seats, István Csurka's far right MIEP. It was not needed and its image would have tarnished FIDESZ.

Almost two years on, the process of the restructuring of the right is still not complete. KDNP has ceased to operate as a genuine independent party. MDF, though it had become a virtual satellite of FIDESZ at the election, has since shown limited signs of renewal and revival, though none that seriously challenge FIDESZ. The coalition has held. FIDESZ remained the leading party in the polls, ahead of MSZP until six months ago, when it was overtaken by MSZP. Neither FKGP nor MIEP at present seem a threat to FIDESZ, but they may bide their time and find opportunities. The fate of FKGP remains unclear. However, Central European party systems remain volatile. FIDESZ should not forget the fate of MDF.

3. The Czech Republic

Developments in Poland and Hungary show some parallels. Superficially, that is much less true of the two states formed out of the former Czechoslovakia, although at least in the Czech Republic some of the same issues have arisen. The problem of restructuring the right in the post-transition has also become salient in the Czech Republic. Not only did the social liberals in OF lose the battle for the unity of Czechoslovakia, they also lost the battle over the pace of reform. After the 1992 election the country was divided in a "velvet divorce" and a radical centre-right coalition, dominated by Václav Klaus and his ODS, came to power, committed to pushing through a thoroughgoing market reform. His coalition partners (KDU-ČSL and ODA), were unable to control Klaus and felt themselves manipulated and steamrollered. For ODA, the commitment of ODS to market principles was not always sufficiently coherent when it conflicted with that party's clientelist interests. KDU-ČSL was concerned that the social and moral dimension was ignored in a single-minded commitment to economic reform [Fitzmaurice 1997: 127-139].

As long as there was economic growth, low unemployment in most areas and the ‘downside’ of economic reforms in terms of serious corruption and the creation of losers as well as winners remained hidden, it was possible to ignore these criticisms. By the 1996 elections though, voters fired a warning shot across Klaus’s bows. He had to make concessions both to the ČSSD, the victors of the election, quadrupling their vote to within striking distance of ODS and to his KDU-ČSL coalition partners. When the economic crisis broke in 1997, Klaus’s critics all united, including President Havel, the opposition, KDU-ČSL and an internal opposition in ODS, forcing his resignation. This internal opposition formed a new party to contest the 1998 elections. Called *Unie svobody* (US), deliberately copying the Polish Freedom Union (UW), it aimed (unlike UW) to become the main pole of the centre-right as ODS lost support and ODA imploded. It could hope to take support from ODS, ODA and KDU-ČSL. However, Klaus and ODS, once in opposition, after a temporary no-party cabinet had been formed proved resilient and moved back into the lead in the polls during the campaign, easily remaining the largest party on the centre right.

The centre-left remained stable throughout the Parliament. No centre force emerged. No party to the left of ČSSD represented a serious challenge. ČSSD’s poll results fluctuated and as the election neared it seemed unlikely to achieve 30% as some 1997 polls had suggested. It was, though, with the split in ODS, likely to emerge as the largest party even with no better result than in 1996. It was widely seen as the front runner and likely government party after the elections. The communists (KSČM) level of support remained stable and no fundamental change in the nature of the party took place. However, unlike 1996, it now emphasised its common ground with ČSSD, desire for a change and offered external support, though admitting that ČSSD would not welcome KSČM support. As in Slovakia, an unknown populist party; based on the grievances of losers in reforms; especially pensioners, mushroomed from its 3.1% in 1996 to poll ratings of 11%, taking votes across the boards from KSČM, ČSSD and KDU-ČSL. Its possible entry into Parliament posed a real threat to ČSSD, which might then be unable to put together a majority coalition.

In the event, ČSSD won 32.3%, an unexpectedly good result. ODS came in second with 27.7%, also an excellent result. The breakaway US failed to make the decisive breakthrough it had hoped for, winning only 8.6%. The KSČM won 11.3%, a small increase, the Republicans (3.9%) and the pensioners’ party (3.06%) failed to win parliamentary representation. The overall right/left balance had changed little since 1996.

The ČSSD victory was difficult to turn into an effective governing coalition. As no open co-operation with the KSČM was possible, only two majority coalitions were possible: a ČSSD-led ČSSD+KDU-ČSL+US coalition (112 seats) or an ODS-led ODS+KDU-ČSL+US coalition. Neither Zeman nor Klaus could build a majority coalition. The result was a functional grand coalition formalised in an ‘opposition agreement’. ČSSD formed a minority government under Zeman as Prime Minister, with Klaus taking the important position of Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and with ODS giving its support to the government. The two parties, with together a “constitutional majority” (137 seats/200) plan to change the electoral system towards a majority system. Defended as the only alternative and as a contribution to stability, this *de facto* grand coalition has been severely criticised. It has created a weak minority government that cannot be removed, as under the opposition agreement ODS is committed to not supporting a motion of no-confidence

during the life of this Parliament in a period where pro-active government is needed. It has frozen further evolution of the party system on both left and right.

4. Slovakia

Slovakia is the most singular or atypical of the four cases. The party system remains the most volatile. Party discipline and party organisation are still weak. More than elsewhere in the region the key political cleavages are issues of national identity and relationship to the old system rather than western style cleavages. The developments elsewhere in Central Europe, tending towards a more 'modern' western type of party system, characterised by limited electoral competition between two broad blocs of the centre-right and the centre-left, have been much more limited in Slovakia. Attempts to 'modernise' the Slovak political system remain fairly unsuccessful. Two broad camps have emerged in Slovakia, but not based on left-right cleavages: a nationalist, old system camp and a modernising, internationalist camp [Bútora et al. 1999].

The dominant personality in Slovak politics since 1990 has been Vladimír Mečiar [Fitzmaurice 1997: 137-143]. He was originally Prime Minister of Slovakia within the Czechoslovak Federation, heading a VPN-Christian Democrat coalition. In the turmoil over the future of the Federation he was deposed, only to return in 1992 at the head of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), a nationalist movement that broke out of VPN and, because of its more cautious position on economic liberalisation, was able to appeal to voters who felt themselves to be losers from reform. In alliance with the pro-independence SNS, Mečiar's HZDS called the bluff of the dominant Czech party that won the 1992 election on the Czech side, Václav Klaus's ODS. With Mečiar, HZDS and the Slovak National Party (SNS) in control in Slovakia and ODS and Václav Klaus dominant in the Czech Republic, separation became inevitable. Mečiar remained in power in the independent Slovak Republic after 1993. His arrogant and authoritarian political style and his approach to modernisation caused strains and eventually splits within HZDS. Eventually the combined opposition, HZDS dissidents (later DUS) under Moravčík, and the Hungarian parties combined to pass a motion of censure. A modernising coalition assumed power, but was unable to retain its majority at the election six months later in September 1994. Apart from the high political cost of co-operation with the Hungarian parties – a problem specific to Slovakia – the incomplete transformation and modernisation of the post-communist Democratic Left Party (SDL) was a serious problem. Its position on future relations with HZDS was never unequivocal. Inside the party its participation in the coalition with the centre right was a cause of conflict. A breakaway faction united with trade union activists from the old system to form the ZRS (Slovak Workers Party). This demagogic party won a surprising 7.3% and then, predictably, formed a nationalist-old system coalition with HZDS and SNS. Mečiar returned like a political Houdini [Fitzmaurice 1995b].

During the 1994-1998 legislature, the coalition held together despite severe clashes between the partners over Mečiar's style and over the approach to privatisation and media policy issues. As the legislature moved to a close, the coalition parties were well behind in the polls, but no-one would lightly predict the defeat of Mečiar. He is a survivor. The issues he represents have strong resonance with Slovak voters. The more embattled and condemned from the outside he is, the more he is able to play the strings of Slovak nationalism. Even the long-running conflict with the President of the Republic did not dent Mečiar's position. On the contrary, he was able to assume the powers of the presidency,

in addition to those of prime minister, when Michal Kováč' mandate expired in March, though these were later devolved to the president of Parliament.

As elsewhere, the central issue was the restructuring of the centre-right opposition. In Slovakia the problem was compounded by the fact that a credible alternative majority would need to include the left-leaning SDL and the Hungarian parties. No other grouping could expect to win a majority. The KDH and the DUS had co-operated well, as the hard core of the Moravčík coalition and they had also co-operated in opposing efforts by HZDS to impeach President Kováč to control the Slovak media, and to maintain a western orientation of Slovak foreign policy both in regard to NATO and EU membership. The Mečiar-led government was ostensibly in favour of both, but did little to ensure that Slovakia would be included in the first wave. Indeed, for political reasons, it was excluded from both. The government sabotaged the referendum on NATO, having failed to campaign for a Yes vote. The opposition had at the same time tried to promote a constitutional initiative providing for direct election of the president, which was again sabotaged by the government.

Catalysed by these government actions, the 'Blue Coalition', later the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), emerged. It included the KDH, DUS and three smaller parties including the Greens and Social Democrats. It was a 'rainbow coalition' extending from right to left. It was formed for pragmatic reasons. Only such a block could hope to become the largest party and so immediately be charged with forming a government, preventing Mečiar from seeking to break opposition unity to stay in power. The obvious problem was the internal cohesion of SDK, its still ambiguous relations with SDL and the need for co-operation with the Hungarian parties. SDK held up well and with 26.5% finished close behind HZDS (27.1%).

The emergence from nowhere of the new populist, anti-Mečiar Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) led by the charismatic Mayor of Košice (Slovakia's second city), Mr. Schuster, showed that the party system remained volatile. New parties could enter like shooting stars as media creations. At one point SOP was credited with 18% in the polls, but ended with only 8.1% – still a significant result for a 'virtual' party. It probably took most votes from disillusioned voters in the Mečiar camp, preventing HZDS from retaining a sufficient critical mass of support.

As it was, SDL (14.8%) did well, though it did not break through its 15% target, making it, rather than SOP, the new king-maker. The four opposition groupings (SDK, SDL, SOP and the Hungarians – SMK) won 58.1% and 93 seats (out of 150), giving them not only a majority but even a constituent three-fifths majority, and the majority needed to elect a new president (vacant since March). Even without the Hungarians or SOP there would be a majority. A four-party coalition of all the opposition parties (SDK, SDL, SOP, SMK) was formed [Fitzmaurice 1999].

The election was more in the nature of the founding election that Slovakia had never had. A rainbow alliance of internationalist modernisers confronted a nationalist, statist, inward-looking coalition of old political forces. The victory of the opposition was a new start. This victory was confirmed by the defeat of Mečiar in the May 1999 presidential election by SOP leader Schuster. Now the restructuring of the party system may be able to begin. HZDS may split and SDK may become a people's party of the centre-right. However, the future of SOP is uncertain.

5. Trends across the Region

There are signs that the party systems have not settled as much as appeared to be the case at the previous round of elections [Delwitt and Dewaele 1998]. Those elections saw considerable new entry and meltdown among parties that appeared well established. It seems likely that this process may continue for some time to come before a greater degree of stability in the party system is achieved. Overall, these elections leave the clear impression that party systems and individual parties are vulnerable and have set down few deep roots. It should however be said that this applies less to the left part of the political spectrum, where one single dominant, relatively well-rooted party has emerged as the standard bearer of the left pole, and hence is a potential government party. This clearly applies to both MSZP in Hungary and SLD in Poland, although they lost power. They face no challengers on the left and have the largest or second largest share of the vote. These elections were less defeats for MSZP and SLD than for the coalition partners. ČSSD had a challenger to its left, but the KSČM has been tamed, offering itself simply as a potential junior partner to ČSSD. Slovakia is the odd man out. Whilst the SLD does dominate the left, it does not represent an alternative pole. At best, it can play a king-making role, as it came to do after the 1998 election.

The central problem of this round of elections was the complex process of realignment on the right. The emergence of dominant parties in a centre-right pole can be seen as part of a wider process, in which political systems more closely align themselves with western models. There is now a clear left and right pole, each organised around a dominant party in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. A centre-right opposition pole has also emerged in Slovakia, though it needs to ally with the 'modernising' SLD to obtain a majority.

A pattern has emerged of 'alternation'. The party or parties in power have systematically been penalised by the electorate. Parties in power, whether on the left as in Hungary and Poland, or on the right as in the Czech Republic, were pro-European modernisers, less by ideological commitment than by force of circumstances. This does not mean that there was a rejection of modernisation or of European integration on the part of the electorate. Indeed, one obvious general trend is the general acceptance of modernisation as a political objective. Political debate is, with some exceptions, restricted to the method not the objective itself. Politicians need to demonstrate their capacity to manage modernisation effectively without tolerating too much corruption or creating too many losers. The losers in the electorate punished the parties in power for failing to create a feel-good factor. The pendulum swung in all four countries. In Poland and Hungary from left to right; in the Czech Republic to the left; in Slovakia from populism to modernism. This confirms the fragility of the party system.

An important trend to emerge across the region has been concern about governability. Voters have looked to reward parties that have provided or look likely to provide effective government. Concern about corruption, economic crime and security has emerged strongly in all four countries. Parties have been obliged to emphasise team work, underline leadership in depth and project softer images. Both the Czech ČSSD and ODS gave less emphasis to their respective leaders Zeman and Klaus than in 1996. Both did well. In Hungary, both MSZP and FIDESZ did well. SDS and FKGP did less well, as they did not project strongly on a competence scale. In Poland, UW, LSD had good elec-

tions alongside AWS. PPL, the junior coalition partner in the SLD-led coalition, did badly, projecting weakly by most competence measures.

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